

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

No. I

PEOPLE AND POLITICS

WORKERS' EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION
38a, St. George's Drive :: London, S.W.1

3d.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

On the station, at the depot, in the pub or in the factory, people talk. Sometimes they discuss the war, and the sort of world they want when it is over. Out of this kind of talk has developed the Discussion Group.

A good Discussion Group will want to know more about the subjects they have been discussing, but may wonder where they can obtain the facts. A leader, preparing for a discussion, may not have the time to work through all the available material. It is to meet this need that these pamphlets are designed.

Each will deal with a topic which is frequently discussed. Its aim will be first, to provide the basic facts; second, to suggest some questions for discussion; and third, to give suggestions for further reading.

It does not claim to be a treatise. It does not try to do the leader's job, though it may enable him to do it better. It is essentially a guide; its purpose is to help, to stimulate, and to suggest. Each topic, with its subsections, will provide the basis for a number of discussions. The rest will depend upon the leader and the Group.

The aim of these booklets is strictly practical. Their final form is not fixed. If you have any criticisms or ideas on how to make them better, let us know.

W.E.A. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

No. 1

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PEOPLE AND POLITICS

How Democratic Institutions Work

What is democratic Government ? How can we make it work ?

We all know the *idea* of democracy. The people govern. But also we know that in practice the people *don't* govern. It would be untrue to say we ourselves govern—in the sense that we actually make the decisions about the extra twopence taxation on a pint of beer, or the size of the meat ration, or how far the Beveridge Report is to be put into operation. These decisions are made by the officials in the Treasury, or the Ministry of Food, and approved by Ministers or by the War Cabinet itself. Yet these decisions do vitally affect our lives. And the idea of democratic government is that somehow or other we, the body of ordinary citizens, can control the decisions or the people who make them.

How far do we exercise any effective control in practice ? What opportunities are open to us ?

To answer this question we must look carefully at the present political system and try to see how it works.

People and Their Opinions

People have ideas about politics. Very few of us are so dumb that we don't sometimes express an opinion about some political happening. Mussolini resigns ; food prices are raised ; or women are going to be directed to jobs in industry. We express our views on the matter in the pub or the club or at home. Often the issue is one that affects us intimately ; but sometimes it is less immediate—the question of what should be done with Germany after the War. Our opinions will have been formed by all kinds of influences. They will often be vague because we don't

really know the facts. But there is always a mass of partly formed unorganised political opinion. What effect does this have on the Government?

What relation is there between me telling my friends what I think about Mussolini's resignation and the officials in the Foreign Office, Mr. Eden, and the War Cabinet, and whoever else plays a part in actually deciding how the new situation in Italy is going to be dealt with?

On the face of it one would say very little. Most of the time this vague body of public opinion has little positive effect upon policy. Except at times of actual crisis we have interests that tend to turn our minds away from political activities—family affairs, the local Football Club, Littlewoods, or social interests. Occasionally some of us, if we feel very strongly about a point, may write to the newspapers, or to our M.P.'s, or even help to organise a meeting about it. We have every right to do these things. But most of us are not often prepared to use these rights, even when the issue is one that we feel affects us personally.

Public opinion then, in the sense of the opinions of the mass of ordinary people, is normally a force in the background, which has to be taken into account when policy is formulated—very often from the standpoint of how such a policy will affect people's attitudes and votes at the next election. The Government may decide not to take such-and-such steps in relation to the unemployed because of the probable resistance of public opinion. Public opinion in this sense is thus a limiting factor rather than a determining one.

At times of real crisis, however, the opinions of the mass of the people can have a decisive effect. Thus, in December, 1935, the British Government abandoned the Hoare-Laval proposals, whereby Britain and France were to allow Mussolini to exercise effective control over a large area of Abyssinia. Again, the Chamberlain Government was replaced by that of Mr. Churchill, in April, 1940. In both cases the driving force behind the change was the opinions of large numbers of ordinary people—led and made effective, no doubt, by organised groups, including, of course, the political parties.

Organised Public Opinion

While the mass of unorganised public opinion operates only intermittently, and has little lasting influence on Government policy, the opinions of people organised in groups and associations operate all the time and have a great deal of influence. It is largely through such organisations that the political views of individuals can be made to affect Government decisions (central or local) in a positive way.

Take the local fish-and-chip man who is losing business through a shortage of fish or frying fats. What can he do to improve his supplies? As an individual fish-fryer he can do very little, except grumble to his friends or write to the local paper. But as a member of a Fish-Fryers' Association he can bring up his difficulties at a meeting of fellow members of the trade in that area. Then, if there is general agreement that trade is in a bad way, the local group can get into contact with the central office of the Association and put its case. The central office is in a strong position to take the matter further if it thinks fit. It can make representations to the Fish Marketing Board, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, or the Ministry of Food. Or it can see that a question is put down in the House of Commons on the subject.

This is an example of *organised* public opinion in action. Or perhaps it would be better to say it is an example of how one section of the public (which may be small in actual numbers) organises with a view to making its opinions effective. This is the kind of method by which the tailoring trade exercises pressure to save trouser turn-ups, or the insurance companies to secure modifications in the Beveridge Plan. A really influential group has at its disposal dozens of ways of influencing Government policy—access to Government Departments or even the Cabinet itself, contact with M.P.s, organising meetings, publication of pamphlets, articles in the national and local Press, etc., the total effect of which can be important.

For what purposes do these groups work?

Many of them are clearly concerned with the interests

of their own particular members. Thus the aim of the Society of Motor Car Manufacturers and Traders will be to ensure that in any legislation which the Government carries through the interests of the British Motor industry will be given due consideration. The National Farmers' Union will push for Government's agricultural policy to be brought into line with the interests of farmers—as it sees them.

Hence one might be inclined to say that organised public opinion is simply a matter of particular groups using pressure to further their own sectional interests.

But is it as simple as that? Some groups clearly are concerned with what one can call matters of *principle*. Thus the National Council of Civil Liberties is a body whose job it is to make a stand wherever it believes the rights of the citizen—to freedom of speech and meeting, freedom of the Press, etc.—are involved. The Howard League exists to press for measures of penal reform. The National Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis exists to see that proper attention is given to those suffering from T.B.

Is it possible to make a clear distinction between 'interest-groups' and 'principle-groups'? In which category would one put the Trade Unions, for example? The National Union of Teachers works for improvement both of the quality of education and of the salaries and conditions of teachers. In actual practice interests and principles seem very closely tied up.

The Political Parties

What are political Parties? How do they come into the general picture?

In many ways they are the most important organisations in our political life. Our political system takes for granted the existence of political parties, with a Party in control of the Government and a Party (or Parties) in opposition prepared to take over the Government, if it can get a majority at the next General Election. The system

does not always work out like this. At present we have a Coalition Government, in which all three major parties—Conservative, Labour and Liberal—are represented, and there is no important party in opposition. But, broadly speaking, Parliamentary Government, as it has developed in this country, is essentially Party Government.

A political party can perhaps best be described as a group whose purpose is to organise public opinion on lines favourable to the general policy for which the party stands, with a view to securing a sufficient body of support from the electorate to enable it to get, or keep, political power.

Clearly these groups are of the kind that are concerned both with *principles* and with *interests*. The Conservative Party is concerned to uphold certain social principles in which its members believe—the Empire, the Monarchy, the rights of property, private enterprise in industry. The Labour Party is concerned with different principles—the improvement of opportunities for the working class, the public ownership of land and at least the key industries. These divisions of principle are not always clear-cut. Members of the Labour Party seem often in practice to take the Empire as much for granted as the Conservatives. Many Conservatives are strong supporters of the Beveridge Plan. None the less they are real divisions.

Parallel with these run the divisions of interest. The interests which have most influence with the Conservative Party are those, naturally, associated with the ownership of land and industry; for instance, the Central Landowners' Association and the Federation of British Industries. At the same time it draws a large body of support from small business people, shopkeepers, farmers, etc. It is particularly strong in country and residential areas. Labour Party policy on the other hand is mainly influenced by the Trades Union Congress and the larger Trade Unions. It has close associations with the Co-operative movement. Its main support still comes from the organised working-class in the older industrial areas.

During the last 70 years or so there has been a tightening up of party organisation. The local constituency party, the annual party congress, the full-time party

officials and agents, the central party funds, the party programme, the discipline exercised by the party in the House of Commons over M.P.s—are all quite recent developments.

The Labour Party, while it has introduced the essentially democratic idea of an Annual Conference at which delegates from the constituency parties and the affiliated Trade Unions decide the Party's policy for the coming year, has also moved in the direction of strengthening the discipline which the Party Executive and the Central Office ('Transport House') impose upon the rank and file. The Conservative Party remains a much looser kind of association, with a greater concentration of power in the hands of its prominent members, so far as policy decisions are concerned.

In general, while the development has been towards increasing the power of the party as an organisation within the State, it has also been towards increasing the power of the leadership—both Executive and officials—within the party. The individuals who direct the levers of the party machine are in positions of real power.

But their power depends in the last resort upon ourselves. Political parties are instruments which, within the limits of the principles for which they stand, the rank and file can use for their own political purposes. The actual membership of a party is much smaller than the number of votes which it can get at an election. Lots of people will vote for a party candidate when they won't bother (or can't afford) to join the party they vote for. Even the largest of the parties—the Labour Party—has a membership far smaller than its voting strength at the last Election, and only a small proportion of these are active members. The truth is that power tends to become centralised within a party only in so far as the rank and file of its supporters play no active part in the running of it.

Parliament

When we say 'Parliament' in practice we generally mean the House of Commons. The House of Lords still

exists and can have some use as a forum for the discussion of general issues—from colonies to V.D. But it no longer has any constitutional power, except to delay Bills for a period of two years. In the case of Finance Bills it cannot do even that. Since the personnel of the House of Lords makes it an essentially Conservative body, this power may in some situations give rise to serious problems. And the question whether the existing House of Lords should be maintained, abolished or reformed, is one that will eventually have to be settled.

But here we are mainly interested in the House of Commons. What powers has it? Who are the M.P.'s? How effectively do they represent us? What control have we over them?

In theory the House of Commons controls legislation and finance. In practice the initiative in the making of laws and the spending of public funds lies not with the rank-and-file M.P.'s but with the Cabinet and the various Government departments, particularly (so far as financial matters are concerned) with the Treasury. The House of Commons as a body can discuss and amend legislation, but it seldom initiates it. (Occasionally private Members do introduce important Bills—e.g., A. P. Herbert's Marriage Bill and Ellen Wilkinson's Hire Purchase Bill. But it is not an easy matter.)

The real and important functions of the House of Commons are, first, to form a Government; second, to check up on its activities once formed. The vitality of the House of Commons largely depends, in normal times, upon the fact that it is the arena where the struggle between the party in power and the parties in opposition is carried on, where grievances can be ventilated and Government policy criticised. If a worker has been sacked from a war factory, or if Members are dissatisfied with the political developments in North Africa, or if it is felt that the coal situation is being mishandled, such issues can be raised in the House of Commons, either through questions to Ministers or—more important—in actual debate. If it is felt to be necessary, as e.g., over the labour troubles in the West Indies, a public enquiry can be pressed for.

Even under present conditions, with a Government that has an undisputed majority in the House of Commons, and a House of Commons whose effectiveness is obviously reduced through the operation of the electoral truce, the House of Commons remains the vital instrument of democratic control at the centre, through which the decisions of Cabinet and the actions of the Civil Service can be influenced or changed.

Does Parliament Represent Us ?

But clearly the value of the House of Commons depends in the last resort upon its *representative* character. How effectively do M.P.'s represent us ?

There is a sense in which an M.P. represents his *constituency*. He can't wholly ignore local interests and problems. He must 'nurse' his constituency to some extent, if he is to keep a majority at the next election. The Member for a Lancashire constituency must be concerned about the problems of the cotton industry. A Member for one of the Eastern counties must show an interest in agriculture. This applies particularly when the seat is not a safe one, when the constituency has a large 'floating vote' which may swing either way.

There is also a sense in which M.P.'s represent their *party* and the general policy for which their party stands. This has come to be increasingly the case with the general tightening up of party discipline in recent years. It has become very difficult for a Member to vote against his party in the House of Commons. Parties appoint a prominent member as Whip, and his job is to bring the rank and file of the party into line. In the last resort the threat of withdrawing the party's financial backing at the next election, or of actual expulsion from the party, is usually effective. There is a tendency to-day to deplore this as a development towards 'Party dictatorship'. But we have to remember that the rank-and-file M.P., if he has any initiative, does himself have a voice in forming the party decisions by which he is bound.

There is, finally, a sense in which M.P.'s can be said to represent particular *interests* and points of view. There are 615 members of the House of Commons. Their average age in 1936 was about 50 (Conservatives and Liberals just under 50—Labour M.P.'s 56). In private life 68 were lawyers, 66 from the Services, 46 manufacturers and mine-owners, 36 engaged in finance and insurance, 33 merchants, retailers and contractors, 25 in academic jobs, 22 journalists, 12 doctors, 7 newspaper proprietors. 142 were listed as 'unspecified', including landowners and leisured persons, and 83 as 'workers', including Trade Union officials. 169 M.P.s held Company directorships.

As regards education—103 M.P.'s had been educated at Eton, 29 at Harrow, 118 at other large public schools, 115 at small public and secondary schools, 82 at elementary schools, 126 at Oxford University, 95 at Cambridge, 69 at other Universities.

What do these figures suggest? First, that M.P.'s tend to be elderly. Second, that their economic and educational backgrounds tend to be untypical of the body of electors who vote for them. A high proportion of M.P.'s is drawn from a limited selection of jobs—manufacturers, mineowners, financiers, merchants, etc. One M.P. in six, at present, is an old Etonian: not more than about one adult in 3,000 is an old Etonian. This limits the extent to which the experience and viewpoints of ordinary people are represented in the House of Commons.

What decides how far the House of Commons is a fully representative body and what control we have over our M.P.'s?

First, at elections, whether we vote the way we always have, and the way our dads voted before us; or whether we give our vote to the individual who happens to appeal to us most; or whether we vote on the basis of beliefs and principles which we have thought out thoroughly for ourselves beforehand.

Second, in between elections, how far we play an active part in the decisions on the basis of which a candidate is selected; how far we exercise pressure upon our M.P.'s,

keep them aware of our interests and problems, make our views known to them on every issue that affects us.

To sum up :—

1. Organised public opinion is a lot more influential than unorganised.
2. Organised public opinion works through groups, the purpose of which is by various means to bring pressure to bear upon Government policy.
3. Political Parties are groups of a special kind, based on divisions both of interest and of principle, which occupy a key position in our political system.
4. The House of Commons is the central organ through which organised public opinion in general, and the Parties in particular, operate. Its main functions are to form a Government, and to check up on the Government, once formed.
5. The extent to which the House of Commons can be made a fully representative body, and can be used as an instrument through which we ourselves can exercise control over decisions, depends upon the extent to which we play an active and responsible part in Elections, in party organisations, and in any other organisation through which pressure can be brought to bear upon M.P.'s.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do we want democracy at all ? Or should we be better off if we left all decisions to "experts" ?
2. Does a democratic system necessarily mean party organisations and party politics ?
3. Have the existing political parties lost touch with the needs and problems of ordinary people ? How can they be brought into closer touch ?
4. Can party loyalty, or loyalty to a trade union, be carried too far ?
5. Do we have sufficient control over our M.P.'s ?

HOW PUBLIC OPINION IS FORMED

Public opinion—in the sense of the opinions of ordinary people—is often ineffective for the simple reason that it's vague, variable, and lacks organised means of expression. Only a small minority plays an active part in politics or thinks seriously and critically about political problems. Why? Is it simply that "human nature is like that"—that most of us are the kind of people who can't and won't bother about such matters? Or is it because of the particular *kind* of public opinion we have at the present time, and the way in which it is formed? If it's the latter, we ought to examine more closely some of the main forces which help to shape our views.

The Press

The press, clearly, is one very important influence. Very few adult citizens don't read a newspaper fairly regularly. (Before the War the total average sales of daily and Sunday newspapers amounted to about 30 million copies.) And few have any other regular source of information about current problems—apart from the Wireless. Now the Press is an industry which has undergone great changes during the last 60 years. In the 19th century newspapers were on the whole organs of opinion, appealing to a restricted public. But by the end of the century, with the great strides made in the technique of printing, together with the appearance of a much wider reading public as a result of universal elementary education, it became possible to exploit newspaper production as a commercial proposition.

This has meant various things. First, that it is now impossible to launch a national daily or Sunday newspaper with less than a million pounds capital; two millions had to be paid to put the *Daily Herald* onto a commercially

successful basis. (The *Daily Worker*, which depends heavily on readers' subscriptions, is an exception to this rule.) Hence the greater part of the daily, Sunday and evening Press is now controlled by a few powerful business groups—Odham's, the Kemsley group, the Beaverbrook group, etc. Moreover, since a penny newspaper now costs about 1½d. to produce and distribute, this means that newspapers have to depend largely upon advertisements to enable them to pay their way. Consequently advertisers are in a strong position to influence newspaper policy. And since the main object of those who produce newspapers is to sell the paper rather than inform the public, there is naturally a tendency to develop their contents along sensational lines: to work up "stunts" and "human interest" stories, to give more space to a discussion of a film-star's new husband or new costume than to the economics of rationing or the implications of an important piece of scientific research. Few newspapers give more than scrappy accounts of debates in the House of Commons.

All this tends to be justified on the ground that newspapers do in fact 'give the public what it wants'. In a limited sense this may be true. If a newspaper is to pay it must meet a mass demand. But the question remains—how far do those who control the newspapers tend to determine our demands along certain definite lines in the first place?

There are, of course, a number of weekly and monthly publications with a relatively small circulation, such as *The Spectator*, *New Statesman*, *Economist*, which succeed in maintaining a more independent position, and are able to concentrate more upon giving accurate information on which reasoned political judgments can be based. The same may be said of a few daily newspapers—*The Times*, for example, and the *Manchester Guardian*. But the influence of this type of journal, though important, is limited to a small fraction of the population.

By the way in which they select and present news, newspapers are able to exercise a great influence upon our ideas about current questions. For example, when in the summer of 1942 the question of fuel rationing was under

discussion, it was possible for one section of the Press, by seizing on and exaggerating one aspect of the proposed rationing scheme, namely, the size of the clerical staff required to operate it, to prejudice a large number of people against the scheme as a whole. If we read only one newspaper, and read that uncritically, we are handicapped from the start in our efforts to form sound judgments about current problems.

The B.B.C.

Wireless has increased enormously in importance over the last 20 years as a force for influencing opinions—as Hitler and his brother dictators discovered to their advantage, and are now discovering again to their cost. In this country the B.B.C. has held since 1926 a monopoly over broadcasting. It operates under a charter, renewable every ten years. Though not directly controlled by the Government, its relations with the Government are, especially in wartime, extremely close. The Postmaster-General has the right of veto over programmes: the Minister of Information exercises general supervision over news. Ministers are able through the B.B.C. to state their policies and to make appeals to the public. The Prime Minister can give a review of the War situation. The Minister of Transport can ask us not to travel over Bank Holiday week-end. What kind of influence over public opinion does the B.B.C. exercise?

Speaking broadly, the B.B.C. gives us a chance of getting at news about current events that is more objectively selected and put out than that which comes to us through the newspapers, though this news must, like any other information, be coloured by the preconceptions of those who select it. We have also an opportunity (through Parliament) of exercising some control over the policy of the B.B.C., as we have not in regard to the Press. On the other hand, our opportunity to use the B.B.C. to educate ourselves to understand the real character of the problems that we have to face is limited by the fact that it tends—partly because of its close relation with the Government—to fight shy of dealing freely with controversial issues.

Even the Brains Trust appeared to move in the direction of entertainment.

Education

How we react to news and to events, how far our attitude is critical or uncritical, what powers we possess in the way of forming judgments—are all likely to be largely determined by the kind of education which we have received.

If we left school at 14, as is the case with seven out of ten children at the present day, our ability to judge what should be done about, say, a new crisis threatening if India is bound to be limited by the fact that the word 'India' may mean to us nothing much beyond the victories of Clive, the Mutiny, and those turbulent tribesmen on the North-west frontier that show up prominently in the films.

If we left school at or before 16, as is the position of another two in every ten, we may have rather more factual knowledge, but unless we've carried on our education for ourselves in the interval we are not likely to know much about, say, the economic problems of the Indian peasantry, or the political aims of the Indian Congress and the Moslem League.

If we are members of that fortunate minority who have been to a University, our position should be a much better one. We shall, at any rate, have had an opportunity to get enough factual knowledge about the social background of Indian politics to judge the problems for ourselves. More important still, we shall have had a chance of acquiring a *method* of thinking about problems generally, so that even if our actual knowledge about India is limited, we shall know how to go about the business of finding out the facts and forming judgments.

Another distinction also comes in here. A small proportion of those between 13 and 18 receive a special type of secondary education at the so-called 'public schools'. Opinions differ about the merits and defects of these

schools, from an educational standpoint. But, viewed from the standpoint of politics, those attending them have one great advantage over against those educated in State schools: a large measure of confidence in themselves and in their own capacities. It is, moreover, from those attending these schools that a high proportion of candidates for politically responsible jobs are recruited. According to Professor Tawney, in 1937, 152 out of 210 senior home Civil Servants, 122 out of 156 County Court Judges, Recorders, etc., were products of public schools.

We have, in fact, a two-track educational system in Britain. The few who travel by the Public school track are encouraged to think of themselves (as the facts warrant) as people likely to have a considerable say in the way in which things are run, while the many who travel by the State school track, in general, are not.

Thus people's political effectiveness is bound, under present conditions, to vary greatly, not merely according to their natural abilities—that is inevitable—but also according to the duration and type of education which they have received. The citizen whose education stopped when he left the Senior school at 14 is likely to be in a weak position, politically, as compared with his fellow citizen who went through a Public school to a University. He tends to lack the actual knowledge, the technique of thinking and expressing himself, as well as the confidence, that the other tends to have acquired.

Social Background

How we live and how we work have a powerful influence on how we think. Bad housing conditions, cramped surroundings, undernourishment, ill-health, insecurity, lack of leisure and opportunities for travel and social intercourse, are all background factors that operate to prevent us from making the most of our capacities, whatever they may be.

Check this up in the light of your own experience. A man who has to do all his reading and thinking after a day's

work in a room in which his wife is listening to the wireless and his children are playing is politically at a disadvantage as compared with those whose homes give more space. A woman who has to work 14 hours a day cooking meals, keeping the house clean, minding children, has seldom time or opportunity to weigh up the Government's foreign policy. A man whose physical and mental condition has been damaged by a long period of unemployment tends to lose a sense of responsibility towards a society which he feels has let him down.

Our jobs take up, in normal times, about half of our waking lives, and the effect of our experience in our jobs upon our whole attitude to society is clearly of the first importance. Some types of job—teaching, for example—give people an opportunity for exercising responsibility. A much larger number don't. Many of us work as operatives, whose function is solely to operate, not to have any say in the decisions on the basis of which operations are carried on. This makes it more difficult for us to act responsibly in other fields.

How can one expect, say, girls in their twenties, now working in war factories, to look upon themselves as responsible citizens, if their actual working lives give them little or no training in responsibility? Membership of a Trade Union can help, but it doesn't solve the problem. In any case only a minority of those who work are as yet Trade Union members. Given this kind of industrial background, it is not surprising that many of us should be easily swayed by propaganda, should fall for the predictions of the astrologist and the quack, or should take up an apathetic attitude to political problems.

For lack of space nothing has been said about the *cinema*, which influences opinion in important ways; nor about *organisations*—the Political Parties, Churches, Trade Unions, etc., whose influence, at any rate among the ranks of their own members, is considerable. These are points worth discussing further.

Summing up this section, one might say:—

First, that people's opinions seem to be shaped by a

variety of forces, some of which—the Press, for example—put into the hands of a few a large measure of control over the opinions of the mass, and tend to appeal to people's feelings rather than help them to form their own thought-out judgments.

Second, the kind and quantity of education that a man has enjoyed is an important factor helping to determine his political effectiveness—i.e., the extent to which he is able to think and act for himself in relation to political questions.

Third, the physical and social background of a man's life, and the conditions under which he works, may affect favourably or unfavourably his powers of judgment and his sense of social responsibility.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the main causes of political apathy? How can they be removed?
2. Should Broadcasting be controlled by the Government, or left to private enterprise?
3. Can a man who cannot read or write play an effective part in a modern democracy?
4. Does our present educational system train us to be responsible citizens? What are the weaknesses of the Press, as at present organised?
5. How far are our political opinions shaped: 1, by the newspaper we read; 2, by our income; 3, by our job?

WHAT CAN WE DO ?

Where democracy decays it is usually by *default*. People give up bothering about politics. Or not enough of them bother enough of the time. Or they fall for the propaganda of those who say :—'democracy is rotten and corrupt—let us run things for you'.

We ourselves, as Stafford Cripps recently pointed out, tend to distinguish between 'they'—the few on top who make the decisions—and 'we'—the folk down below who have to accept the decisions. This distinction, Cripps argued, was undemocratic and defeatist. In fact there seems to be truth, both in the distinction, since from what has been said it does seem that power in our society tends to get concentrated in the hands of particular groups ; and in Cripps's argument that it's a dangerous distinction to make, since if we once leave go of the principle that we can and must run things for ourselves, there is danger that some self-interested group of bosses may step in and take over control. That means, if we dislike the idea of the boss-State (another name for the Fascist State), we must find means of running things more effectively for ourselves. How ?

The Machinery

Improvements of the machinery of our political system are sometimes put forward as the solution : e.g., limiting more effectively party expenditure at elections ; or compelling parties to publish the sources of their funds ; or abolishing the right of certain property owners and University graduates to two votes instead of one ; or introducing a system of voting which gives a better chance to the smaller political parties (adopting one or other of the methods of Proportional Representation) ; or introducing an educational test for electors—or for M.P.'s—or making voting at elections compulsory ; or devolving more power onto elected Regional authorities (for well-defined areas like Wales, or the North-East of England).

All such changes are worth considering on their merits. If any of them seems likely to help in the effort to secure more control for the people over the way in which Government is carried on, by all means let us work for its introduction. But let us not be misled into thinking that the root of the problem is this question of machinery. The root is the people who have to work the machinery. We could make much better use than we do of the imperfect democratic machine that we've got. An excellent machine can be wrecked if it gets into the wrong hands. The constitution of pre-Nazi Germany (the Germany of the Weimar Republic) was in many ways a first-rate piece of democratic machinery. But it couldn't save German democracy.

Organisation

All that has been said goes to show that public opinion can only operate effectively if it is *organised*. Therefore, if we want to make *our* opinions effective, it is through organisations that we have to work. One of the problems of a highly industrialised society such as our own is that it tends to root people up and dump them down in large masses round factories, etc., often with little in the way of organised social life in which they can play a responsible part. Also that organisations, such as Trade Unions, that start out small and democratic tend to finish up large and highly centralised, apparently more powerful, but lacking the control and initiative from the bottom, without which they lose most of their value.

Possibly then, if we want to make democratic control more of a reality, one of our main jobs at the present time should be to do all that we can to help to build up organisations through which the ordinary citizen can express his point of view, develop a sense of responsibility, and bring pressure to bear on those in authority. For this purpose any kind of organisation—a Church group, Constituency Party, Trade Union branch, Works Committee, Co-operative Guild, Parish Council, W.E.A. Branch, whatever it may be—can be important. Its value depends largely upon the

extent to which it provides an opportunity for ordinary people (a) to make their opinions known; (b) to get experience of running things for themselves.

Education

Democratic organisations will only work if the people who work them have a strong sense of responsibility. In that way running things for ourselves is a lot more difficult than leaving it to others to run them for us. It means taking decisions, or contributing to them. Decisions have to be based upon thinking. If our Trade Union branch is going to have a say in the future of the industry in which we work, we have got to know as much as possible about that industry—how it's run at present, what changes in its organisation and prospects the War has produced, and so forth. If our discussion-group wants to influence Local Government, we must understand the powers of the Council, the character of the services which it provides, the methods of election, etc. There is no getting away from this problem of *educating ourselves for responsibility*. Unless we learn to form sensible judgments based upon facts in relation to every aspect of our social life, we shall remain at the mercy of whatever ready-made opinions we happen to pick up from the Press, the Wireless, the Films, or the people we talk to. And we shall have largely ourselves to blame if it is 'they' and not 'we' who take the main decisions.

Social Environment

Finally, there is the problem of removing those disadvantages in our environment which restrict the political effectiveness of most of us. There are strong *political* grounds for welcoming the Beveridge plan if, by providing us with greater economic security, it is going to make us freer to face up to the social and international problems arising out of this War. There are similarly strong grounds for welcoming measures that will maintain full employment, or provisions for a State medical service, or schemes for

rehousing the millions who before the War lived in cramped or unhealthy surroundings, or measures for improving the general standard of nutrition, or the raising of the school-leaving age—in so far as these steps should help to remove some of the major obstacles which have prevented large numbers of us from reaching, so to speak, our full stature as citizens.

But here again it is essential to see things in the right perspective. Social reforms in a democracy are not in any sense an *alternative* to people running things for themselves. They are only part of the *conditions* which should, if properly used, enable us to run things more effectively.

Suggestions for Reading

1. The following are simple, short, useful and fairly cheap :—

Jennings : *Parliament Must Be Reformed*.

(Democratic Order Pamphlet. 1/-.)

Mass Observation : *Britain*. (Penguin. 9d.)

Provides some interesting factual material on public opinion in Britain, pre-War.

Wickham Steed : *The Press*. (Penguin. 9d.)

A good factual book on the organisation, finance, etc., of the Press.

Laski : *Liberty in the Modern State*. (Pelican. 9d.)

Tawney : *Equality*. (W.E.A. Edition.)

Both deal with some of the fundamental problems of British democracy.

Keith : *The Constitution under Strain*. (2/6.)

Deals mainly with wartime political developments.

Cair : *The Responsible Citizen*. (Nelson Discussion Books, 2/-). A good general survey of the British Political System.

Salisbury : *Post-War Conservative Policy*. (6d.)

Tory Reform Committee : *Forward by the Right.*
(Hutchinson, 3d.)

Labour Party : *The Old World and the New Society.* (3d.)
For information about the attitude to Reconstruction questions of the two major political Parties.

Ivor Thomas : *The Newspaper.* (6d.)
(Oxford Pamphlets on Home Affairs.)

2. The following are more difficult, and more expensive, but useful for reference :—

Graves : *The British Constitution.*
A good general book.

Ramsay Muir : *How Britain is Governed*

Laski : *Parliamentary Government in England.*

The first a Liberal and the second a Socialist view of the working of the British political system.

Brogan : *The English People.*

An interesting account of British political and social institutions, written primarily for Americans.

Lippmann : *Public Opinion.*

An American book, with very useful material about how public opinion is formed and influenced.

Jennings : *Parliament.*

A very full factual account about how Parliament actually works.

J. F. S. Ross : *Parliamentary Representation.*

Eyre & Spottiswoode (Publishers) Ltd. 1943.
10/6.

HOW THE W.E.A. CAN HELP

The Workers' Educational Association is a self-governing body of adult students, started 40 years ago. Its aim is to develop that desire to understand, to know the facts, to get to grips with reality, which is the mainspring of the Discussion Group.

Where there is a Discussion Group, or where it is hoped to start a Discussion Group, there are two ways in which the W.E.A. can help.

First, by training Discussion Group leaders and providing them with pamphlets and study outlines.

Second, for those who wish to study any subject more thoroughly, it can provide a tutor who is qualified, and classes can be arranged.

If you want help in any of these ways, or would like further details, get in touch with your local District Secretary. Names and addresses of W.E.A. District Secretaries are given on the back.

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E. Bibby, 258 Oxford Road, Manchester, 13. Area covered: Parts of Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire.

SOUTH-WESTERN

J. G. Trevena, Rotherfold, High Street, Totnes, Devon. Area covered: Devon and Cornwall.

YORKSHIRE, NORTH

G. H. Thompson, Blenheim Institute, Blackman Lane, Leeds, 2. Area covered: The whole of Yorkshire, except that part included in Yorkshire(South) District, and part of Lincolnshire.

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E. Fisher, Campo Chambers, 28 Campo Lane, Sheffield, 1. Area covered: Parts of Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, and Nottinghamshire (including Penistone south to Chesterfield, and east via Barnsley to Scunthorpe, Chesterfield east via Retford to Gainsborough, thence north to Scunthorpe).

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Mrs. Francke, 177 Hill Street, Charing Cross, Glasgow, C.3. Area covered: The whole of Scotland.